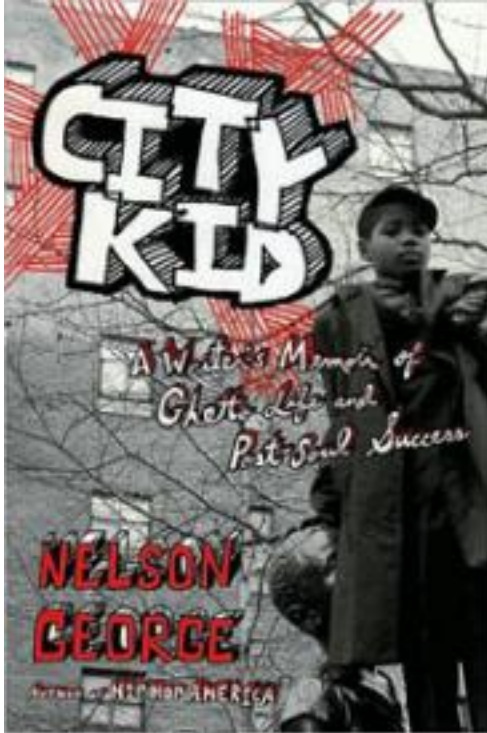


# Creating in the Shadows: A Talk with Nelson George

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"I identify more with Nick Carraway now than I did when I was younger," [Nelson George](#) says about the observant character from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Carraway captured George's attention when he was a nerdy adolescent growing up in Queens, a fact he recalls in his new memoir *City Kid*, which chronicles his coming of age and its influence on his career as a writer. "I've been around a lot of Gatsbys," he adds. "I'm just like Nick, the guy standing by the side watching the drama unfold."

It's true. George was there before Spike Lee was the Spike Lee, before Chris Rock had an HBO Special, before Russell Simmons was a mogul and before hip hop was hip hop. But George has been doing more than standing around. Like Carraway, he's been a narrator of sorts. During the decades spanning his career, George's been recording the rise of post-soul black culture using as many mediums as he can get his hands on. Even if you're not overly familiar with him, chances are you've seen or read something that he's touched. There were the music columns in *Billboard* and the *Village Voice*. There are the six novels and nine nonfiction books which include titles like [Hip Hop America](#), [The Death of Rhythm and Blues](#) and Russell

Simmon's autobiography *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, + God*. There's the screenwriting; he co-wrote the films *CB4* and *Strictly Business*. Then there's the producing; George is an executive producer for both BET's *American Gangster* and VH1's *Hip Hop Honors*. He also wrote and directed the Golden-Globe award winning film *Life Support* that stars Queen Latifah and is based on his sister's life. And you can catch him as host of VH1 Soul's travel show *Soul Cities*.

Now the attention is on him. Here's a portion of observations and thoughts that he shared with Books on The Root about art, place, and life.

### **On writing *City Kid***

I worked on this book for a long time. The New York that I grew up in is disappearing. It has been changed and altered. I wanted to capture some of the places that shaped me-42nd Street, East Village, Soho, Harlem, as well as other places I've been such as Los Angeles and Detroit-a city where I grew up a lot in terms of writing my Motown book, [Where Did Our Love Go?](#) I also wanted to talk about art, without making the book a how-to, rather, I wanted to show through my own life how art can be a transcendental medium. And I've been around a lot of people at the beginning of their journeys. I felt like there was a lot to be said about Chris Rock, Spike Lee, and Russell Simmons when they started out and what lessons could be drawn from them.

It was also important for me to write about my relationship with music because it's been a powerful, spiritual force in my life. When you listen to artists like James Brown, Bob Dylan, or Coltrane they are channeling a spiritual energy. I wanted to be a critic to explain and try to capture that energy.

I've spent most of my career writing about other people, society, and culture. I'm still doing that in this book, but this is a lot more personally revelatory and a challenge for me to talk about. I've had the same nonfiction editor for twenty years and through the writing process she kept yelling, "Where is Nelson George in this book?" It wasn't difficult to write about my mother and the world that we grew up in, but it was challenging when I delved into my adult life. I had all these different threads, my sister's problems, my niece's lives, hip hop, the pop world, the film world. It was easy to write about these different things, but not necessarily to situate myself in them.

It's not an autobiography; I usually say that those are more sweeping looks at your life. *City Kid* is about the journey from the projects to pop culture success. Out of that, the themes of family, art and the cities that have influenced me are intertwined.

### **On Fort Greene, Brooklyn and New York**

There's something about Fort Greene that's been [very magical](#). In the mid-80s it was a breeding ground for black artists and black creativity. You had Spike, Chris, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, and other artists living in this one neighborhood. It was a profound moment. Then there was another wave when you had Mos Def, Common, Talib Kweli, Erykah Badu, and now people like Colson Whitehead and Kevin Powell. *City Kid* has led me to do a [cinematic work about the neighborhood](#). I look at this documentary as part of an ongoing dialogue.

I'm a New Yorker. I hate the suburbs. I believe that New York is still a place where the fusion of culture, artistic expression, and access to media allows you to have a scene that can blow up. I don't want to live in L.A., although I have thought that if I lived out there, I would have done more movies. But I need the grounding of New York.

### **On Spike Lee**

I met the dude, and by some accident, ended up living around the corner from him. I had done a lot of film reviews while writing for the New York Amsterdam News and saw a lot of early stuff from people like Warren Hudlin.

When I first saw *She's Gotta Have It*, I knew I had never seen that movie before. I felt like I recognized the people in it. It felt like Fort Greene and the world we lived in. Investing in the movie was a leap of faith and the only reason I had the money was because I did a quick Michael Jackson biography.

I knew Spike was going to make more movies, but I don't think anyone could have guessed how prolific he would be.

Like I said in *City Kid*, Spike opened the door for nerds. But also, aside from Melvin Van Peebles, no one came from the outside like Spike did and left a mark. That inspired scores of filmmakers. That's how radical it was. To watch an artist like Spike mature and grow right before my eyes was really quite remarkable.

### **On Black Creativity Then and Now**

The 80s broke the door down for black creativity. There was a moment when you had Michael Jackson, Eddie Murphy, Prince, Oprah and the Marsalis brothers in the forefront. Wynton and Branford were like pop stars unlike black musicians had been seen since Miles Davis. You had more black people selling records and tickets, or achieving high ratings. And they had dominant positions. My career as a writer was infinitely helped because I was writing about the tremendous creativity being unleashed from black culture at the time. I looked back at my diaries from '87, '89 and it is unbelievable the amount of new activity that was going on. We were pushing our way in and now we are in.

Right now, black culture is not as rebellious overall, not dangerous, not challenging the status quo like it was in the 80s. We have some established black culture pop figures, but we're not in a hypercreative era where the boundaries of art are being pushed by us. But that's alright especially when you think of cycles.

### **On New Music and the fall of Hip Hop**

My favorite group right now is [TV on the Radio](#). They're a black rock band out of Brooklyn. I also listen to a lot of Afropunk groups, jazz quartets, sophisticated black music. But, I don't think it's a really good time for black music. I don't think it's happening at a high level right now.

Hip hop has become singles music. There's no hip hop artist out now who compels me to spend the time to listen to an entire album. Well maybe MF Doom. People who grew up on hip hop have to realize that every musical movement doesn't stay on top of its game forever. Soul started in the 50s, peaked in mid-60s, developed, matured, and became diluted. Hip hop came out, had a long peak, and something will replace it. Every artistic movement has an arc. Hip hop was rebel music, and now you rebel against hip hop because it's the mainstream. These things are cyclical.

### **On Queen Latifah and *Life Support***

*Life Support* is probably the project that I'm most proud of. It was my first time directing. It is a film based on my family, and it deals with an issue huge in the black community. We got Latifah and I think it was the best work she's done. It was an amazing experience to shoot in parts of Brooklyn that I grew up in. And it was great to do a film that's going to have legs, one that's about family, emotion, and forgiveness.

I didn't cast someone to play myself in the movie because I wanted to make a women's movie. I wanted to write an incredible part for a black woman and show the dynamic story between this woman, her mother, and her daughter. Plus I would be all self conscious about who would play me.

What I've learned about creating is that after these projects, you're not the same person you were when you started. With *Life Support*, I had to turn off my intellect a little and be more emotional. I had to open up. Latifah used to say to me, "Don't use so many words; cut to the chase." She's a very visceral artist so I had to become very visceral which is different from the work I do as a critic. Working on this film unleashed a lot of stuff for me.

**On *Good Hair*** (George is an executive producer)

We're finalizing a deal and it will play in theaters this year. The film debuted at Sundance, did incredibly well and won a special award. It's Chris Rock's look at the world of black hair, relaxers, hair weaves, all of that. It's pretty damn funny and a very unique film. We got some amazing interviews with women like Nia Long, Sarah Jones, and Raven-Symoné that were hilarious but also very honest.

**On *His Ass Power*** (the secret to success that Quincy Jones once told George separated the greats from the near greats; it's the ability to stay focused, ass in chair, and work until something is accomplished)

I am not happy if I'm not doing something. I cannot sit my ass down and relax; I'm kind of bad at it. Working makes me happy. It's not the whole thing of releasing it and talking about the work, like I am now, that makes me happy. What makes me happy is the making, the moments of creativity when things come together, or when you're in that trance-like state. Or when you're on a movie set, you're working on a scene, and you say to yourself, "This shit is working." That what saves you, those moments. All of this work is some quest to be part of something that's elevating and unique.